



Roberts Assists Farmers through Wisconsin Farm Center

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is one of a series of feature stories highlighting DATCP employees and the programs they work in.

MADISON – Dr. John Roberts may be the only veterinarian in the world who has worked for the past 20 years exclusively with dairy farmers concerned about stray voltage. Even though that's his job, Roberts is the first to admit that as a veterinarian he has never taken a voltage measurement on a farm.

That's the way the program was set up in 1988 when the Wisconsin's legislature pioneered a bold and comprehensive approach to identifying and addressing concerns about stray voltage. The mandate was two-pronged. Wisconsin's Public Service Commission (PSC) became responsible for addressing underlying electrical issues. The Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) role was to assist dairy farmers with the non-electrical implications, providing veterinary diagnostic assistance. This joint-agency program was launched under the name of the Stray Voltage Analysis Team (SVAT). In 1995, it became the Rural Electric Power Services (REPS).



Dr. John Roberts is a veterinarian with the Wisconsin Farm Center.

Roberts will be the first to tell you that when he joined DATCP in 1994 it was immediately like walking a tightrope. With a strong empathy for dairy farmers and easy-going demeanor, he notes that neither his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from Michigan State University nor fifteen successful years of private, dairy, veterinary practice in Door County had adequately equipped him for the start of the new job.

"There was no way to prepare for what I had stepped into. The learning curve was steep," recalled Roberts. "Hazards were everywhere. There was a huge backlog of farms to visit. It really was intense."

It did, however, turn out to be worth the effort. When all the dust settled, what became clear to Roberts was that his potential to help dairy farmers had grown way beyond what was previously imaginable.

"Dr. Roberts serves farmers as a calling in his life, not as a job. He practices with his heart as much as his mind," said Mike Powers, Administrator of DATCP's Division of Agricultural Development. "He has the ability to leave everything behind and treat every request with care, providing individualized guidance."

Now, a typical year includes 6,000 to 10,000 road miles and a full work load of 25 to 30 herds for diagnostics. Roberts has made more than 600 calls to various farms over the years and can get pretty animated when explaining the how's and why's of what he does.

"The herds that I have visited are large herds, small herds, traditional herds, grazing herds, and even Amish herds," explained Roberts. "They are not out looking for help. They are in trouble. Things were chugging along okay, and then something happened that they can't figure out; that they can't get past with just the help of their local professionals."

REPS has been successful because the services are comprehensive. The approach is straightforward and inclusive; looking at both what is wrong and why it is happening. Dr. Roberts notes that often farmers are highly-frustrated having already spent time and money without result. As a professional,

Roberts is careful not to get involved unless the request for veterinary assistance comes directly from the farmer. Then he listens.

Roberts works with the farmer, conducting a variety of tests and sifting through the results very carefully. To fill in the gap and find the answer, Roberts asks questions. What animal health or production issue is the farmer concerned about? Locally, what professional support is already involved? Can he contact those local professionals? What diagnostic work has already been done?

“Working for DATCP has been an extraordinary and professionally rewarding experience,” added Roberts. “Not everything works out the way you hope, but I have looked at the data and know that overall there is a significant net dollar improvement on farms that I’ve tried to help. Some people like to base success all on data. To me, it’s always been more than data. I know good things have been done for farmers in need. It means a lot to me.”

In 2006, Roberts faced a consultant’s ultimate challenge. He moved to Florence County to help his aging in-laws with their remaining years of dairy farming. Five years later, his in-laws retired. By the time the herd was sold, production had risen to its highest, lifetime level. Milk quality was excellent, and the cows were all healthy.

“There is no place to hide when you are giving advice to your wife’s parents,” confessed Roberts. “You still have to show up for chores whether it turned out to be good advice or not.”

To Roberts, now nearing retirement age, it was a most satisfying career confirmation to know that the advice he had given to farmers across the state also worked on the home farm.

Requests for veterinary assistance from the REPS program can be initiated by requesting an application from the DATCP’s Farm Center at 1-800-942-2474 or farmcenter@wisconsin.gov.

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